

Book Review: Nygaard-Christensen, Maj, and Angie Bexley (eds.): *Fieldwork in Timor-Leste: Understanding Social Change through Practice*

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Book Reviews

Nygaard-Christensen, Maj, and Angie Bexley (eds) (2017), *Fieldwork in Timor-Leste: Understanding Social Change through Practice* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, (= NIAS Studies in Asian Topics #59), ISBN: 978-87-7694-208-3, 272 pages

Much has been written on Timor-Leste in the years since the country's independence in 2002, be it in terms of state building and peace building, transitional justice, cultural affairs, or economic affairs. The book *Fieldwork in Timor-Leste: Understanding Social Change through Practice*, edited by Maj Nygaard-Christensen and Angie Bexley, however, is innovative insofar as it provides the reader with a comprehensive and detailed account of ethnographic research in Timor-Leste, from the 1960s, when Portuguese rule was nearing its end, through to today. This volume is not a textbook on ethnographic field research, nor does it attempt to give “best practice” advice on how to conduct ethnographic field research. Also, the 11 chapters in this volume do not necessarily follow a stringent structure or clear-cut research questions. However, the book stands out in that it is a kaleidoscope of very individual encounters and experiences during ethnographic field research undertaken throughout different periods in Timor-Leste's history. It is fascinating to follow each individual researcher's strategies of establishing contact, gaining access, and gathering information.

David Hicks, for instance, provides in Chapter 2 a gripping account of his research preparations in Portugal and his subsequent field research in then-Portuguese Timor during the 1960s, and contrasts it to his stays in independent Timor-Leste 40 years later. Moreover, several of the book's contributors describe from different perspectives challenges to investigative and ethnographic field research: While Ricardo Roque vividly writes in Chapter 3 about the difficulties of conducting archival research about and in Timor-Leste, Guteriano Neves (Chapter 10) elucidates the prospects for and limitations of doing ethnographic field research in his own country, and Amy Rothschild (Chapter 11) addresses conflictual relations with other foreigners during her fieldwork in Karas and in Dili.

Similarly, Maj Nygaard-Christensen deals in Chapter 9 with the challenges of gathering information in times of political tension: Using the example of the United Nations Integrated Mission in East Timor (UNMIT) leaked-document conundrum in 2011, which caused friction between the Timorese administration and UNMIT, Nygaard-Christensen

not only deconstructs the prevailing narrative about the leaked UNMIT document, but also lucidly reveals differing and conflicting agendas within both the heterogeneous international group of actors and the heterogeneous local group of actors. The same goes for the contribution of Pyone Myat Thu (Chapter 8), who not only tackles the highly relevant and ongoing problems with regard to customary land ownership and land conflict in Timor-Leste, but also reflects on the problems, challenges, and achievements of her fieldwork. Moreover, she links her own field research experiences with existing ethnographic research literature, thereby opening up space for a very interesting dialogue about the relationship between theory and actual practical implementation. Andrew McWilliam (Chapter 4) describes his compelling research journey in Timor-Leste and discusses contingency effects in ethnographic field research, a factor likely encountered by not just ethnographic researchers but also researchers of other disciplines while attempting to collect data in challenging and rapidly changing environments.

Angie Bexley writes in Chapter 5 about the youth of Timor-Leste, one of the most pressing topics in the country today due to the high rate of youth unemployment. Here, Bexley focuses specifically on the neglected generation of youths who experienced the end of Indonesian rule, the transitional period under the United Nations, and Timor-Leste's independence in 2002. The author is able to create a nuanced account of the unresolved conflict between the old Lusophone generation, which still dominates the political sphere in Timor-Leste, and the younger generations, who were socialised within Indonesian language and culture.

In each of their chapters, Douglas Kammen and Judith Bovensiepen add a promising historical-research perspective to this volume: While Kammen (Chapter 6) investigates the evolution and relevance of the *sukco* in an administrative and socio-political sense from the nineteenth century to today, Bovensiepen (Chapter 7) conveys the convolution of belongings and kinships in Timor-Leste by using the example of the last governor of Indonesian-occupied Timor, Abílio José Soares. Bovensiepen points out that any given individual's support for or opposition to the Indonesian administration during the occupation is an insufficient attribute to apprehend the actual complexities of social relations.

In fact, one of the recurring topics in this volume is the premise that a dichotomous classification into established categories, such as "local versus international" or "resistance versus collaboration," does not make sense in a complex society or help to understand underlying trajectories of social conflict. Rather, in contrast to many other publications, the authors manage to describe and analyse, in detail, micro-relations in

Timor-Leste, thereby making an important contribution to social and cultural research on Timor-Leste and beyond.

This book on ethnographic field research is sure to be of interest to emerging and established researchers not only in the field of ethnographic research but also throughout the wider spectrum of humanities and social sciences. In addition, the book gives practitioners with working experience in Timor-Leste a better understanding of local dynamics and developments. It has to be stressed, however, that the very detailed descriptions of places, topics, and people might be a bit overwhelming to someone who has never been to Timor-Leste. Having worked or conducted research in Timor-Leste will therefore be an asset to readers vis-à-vis the dense recounting of this volume. All in all, the editors Maj Nygaard-Christensen and Angie Bexley have made a timely and valuable contribution to the existing research literature on Timor-Leste.

Deniz Kocak

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